

Conflict & Culture:

Preserving the Palagi Head in wartime

Anna Tulliach graduated from the University of Bologna, School of Arts and Humanities, with an MA thesis about the direction of the Archaeological Museum of Bologna during the years 1921-1944. She conducted research projects on the preservation of museum collections during the two World Wars. She is now a PhD student at the School of Museum Studies, researching the illicit trafficking of museum objects during the Second World War.

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War presents huge conservation challenges for the museum curators tasked with protecting precious artefacts and artworks. The Palagi Head, the most significant object in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna, was subject to various movements and preservation challenges during, and between, the two World Wars. Through a critical analysis of the events that afflicted the Palagi Head, Anna Tulliach, a PhD student in Museum Studies, will discuss how artefacts are preserved during wartime.

The Athena Lemnia statue was sculpted by Fidia, between 451 and 447 BC, for a group of Athenian citizens establishing a colony on the island of Lemnos, in the Aegean Sea. Unfortunately, the original bronze statue is lost, but as usually happens for Greek statues, we know its lineament from several Roman copies. One such copy – of the head of the original statue – is preserved in the collections of the Archaeological Museum of Bologna and is known as the Palagi Head. It is named after Pelagio Palagi, the collector who bought it from the Venetian antiquities market in 1829. By this point, the conservation state of the Palagi Head had deteriorated from centuries of oxidation producing several red spots on the marble surface. Despite this decay, the head has been considered the most remarkable object in the museum's collections for its unquestionable beauty and its strict connection to Fidia, one of the most important sculptors in ancient Greece. The tumultuous twentieth century presented huge preservation challenges to the Palagi Head and the museum's other artefacts. What follows is a brief account of those challenges and how the museum's innovative efforts helped one of the best of humanity's creations survive two of its worst.

“The tumultuous twentieth century presented huge preservation challenges to the Palagi Head and the museum's other artefacts”

World War I

World War I was the first major war to directly affect Italian museums – among them, the Archaeological Museum of Bologna. The First World War introduced the unprecedented threat of aerial Zeppelin bombing. For their safety, the Archaeological Museum's collections, including the Palagi Head, were moved to secure sites located in the museum building – a practice usually employed by Italian museum curators at the time. As an additional measure, the statue was placed inside a wooden case padded with cotton to protect the surface. The Palagi Head experienced several transfers during the war, moving between different museum premises with the purpose of finding the most appropriate location for its care; humidity levels and exposure to possible bombing raids had to be considered.



The Palagi Head atop a pedestal in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna, taken in 1881, showing the extent of the oxidation damage.

The image has been published in: Tulliach, A. (2016) 'Pericle Ducati museologo. Il Museo Civico di Bologna tra il 1921 e il 1944', *Sibrium* XXX, p. 264.

World War II

World War II brought greater destruction from aerial bombings and cities became common battlefields because the industries supporting the war effort were located within urban areas. Bologna was strategically important to the Allies as an industrial and transport hub. Mountainous areas were considered much safer to house precious artefacts. So at the beginning of the Second World War the Palagi Head was transferred, along with the museum's other artefacts, to Marzabotto, a small town located in the more rural and rugged highlands south of Bologna. Unfortunately, in the summer of 1944, the situation in the Apennine zones around Marzabotto became extremely dangerous; German troops occupied the area and seized private and public buildings. The objects were then transferred to two secure sites located in Bologna's city centre: the museum's anti-aircraft defence shelter and the Pascoli school. These buildings were considered secure, both for their minor exposure in case of bombing raids and low humidity levels. The Palagi Head was returned to the museum and securely embedded in a wall. Despite the heavy bombardments that Bologna was subjected to during the Second World War, the Archaeological Museum's collections were saved from major damage. At the end of the war, the Palagi Head was removed from the wall in which it was embedded in a good conservation state. It is now on display as part of the Greek collection of the Archaeological Museum of Bologna.

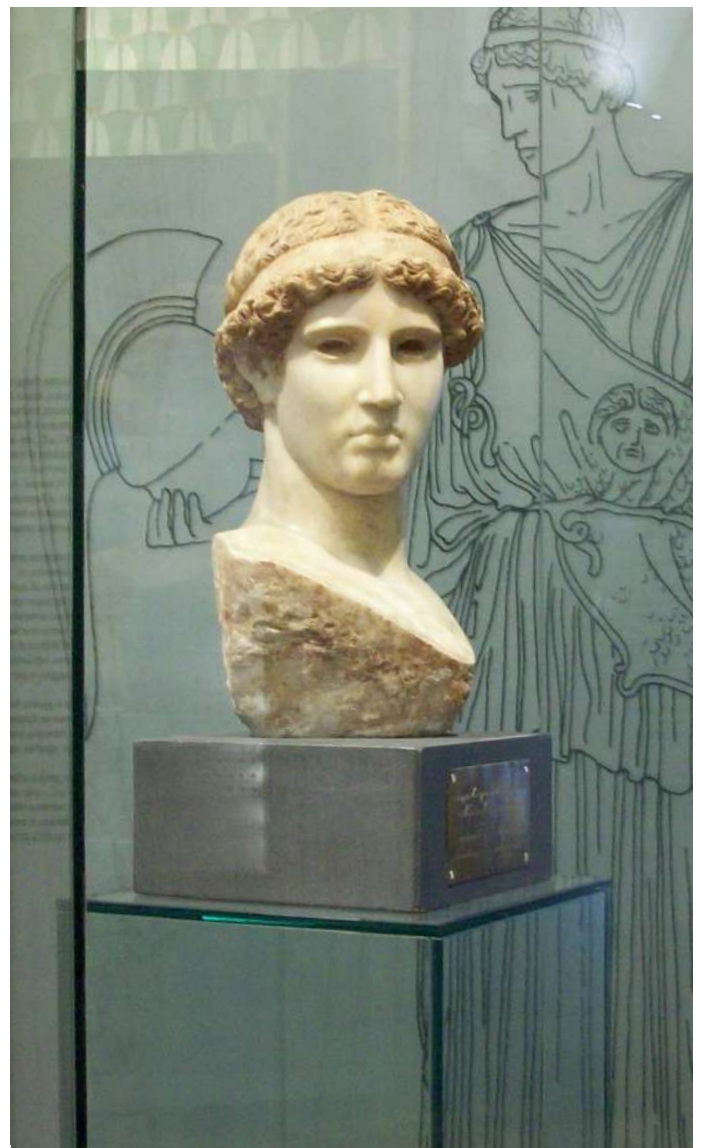


The central museum court and the big staircase. Just behind it is the ground floor room chosen by the museum's director for the protection of the Palagi head.

“The First World War introduced the unprecedented threat of aerial Zeppelin bombing”

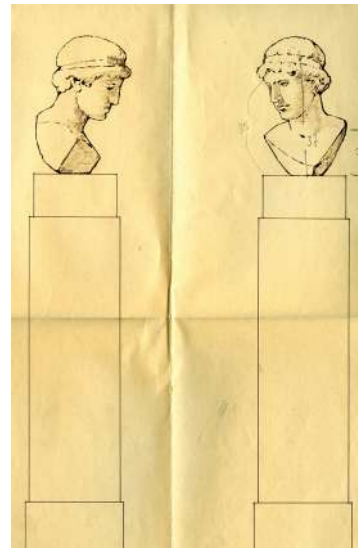
Inter-War Restoration

At the end of World War I the collections were taken out of storage for restoration. Unfortunately, it was not known that the cotton wool the Palagi Head was stored in would further damage its already fragile and compromised state. Cotton wool in contact with a marble surface and under high humidity ferments, which further exacerbated the Palagi Head's already serious oxidation problem, producing additional red spots. Fortunately, a Harvard PhD student researching at the museum, Clarence Kennedy, had studied innovative cleaning treatments for ancient sculptures. He simply immersed the Palagi Head repeatedly in hot water and then removed the red spots with a wooden stick. This simple and non-invasive restoration technique not only removed the damage experienced during the war, but also the spots that plagued it for centuries.



The Athena Lemnia as it appears in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna.

“Art is such a precious commodity that must be preserved as an example of what humanity can achieve”



A sketch of a new exhibition proposal for the Palagi head, made by Luciano Laurenzi, new director of the Civic Museum from 1947.

Image used with permission from Dr. Laura Minarini, Archaeological Museum of Bologna.



Front page of the magazine *Atene e Roma*, in which the museum's director published a paper about the Palagi head. The illustration is a reconstruction of the Fidia's statue made by Moroni.

The image has been published in: Gualandi, G. (1976) 'L'Athena Lemnia e il momento classico nella collezione Palagi', *Il Carrobbio. Rivista di studi bolognesi*, p. 212.



The exhibition of the *Athena Lemnia* in room VI of the Archaeological Museum of Bologna taken in the 1920s. The Palagi head is exhibited near the bronze plaster cast of the *Athena Lemnia* statue, made by Adolf Furtwängler at the end of the 19th century.

Image used with permission from Dr. Laura Minarini, Archaeological Museum of Bologna.

Art is such a precious commodity that must be preserved as an example of what humanity can achieve. The aim of this research project has been to study the strategies used by museum directors to safeguard their collections in wartime. Doing this allows us to investigate the evolution of safeguarding systems in the early twentieth century and assess if they are still relevant in contemporary preservation practice. With this case study, I have argued that

“Cities became potential battlefields and Bologna was considered strategically important by the Allies”

despite the unprecedented challenges faced by curators during this period, both academics and curators were able to discover and utilise unexpected and innovative restoration treatments. It is to these efforts that future generations are indebted, as they admire the Palagi Head shining in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna.

The head of the Athena Lemnia statue in the collections of the Civic Museum of Bologna.

